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Cord Meyer: The verification gap

The long delay of American intelligence in spotting the infiltration of Soviet combat troops into Cuba has raised new doubts in the Senate about the reliability of U.S. SALT verification techniques.

These doubts will now be sharply intensified by the failure, previously unreported, of the Carter administration to obtain Turkish assent to an ingenious new method of monitoring Soviet missile tests. The collapse of this attempt to compensate for the loss of the U.S. bases in Iran leaves a gaping four-year hole in the American verification capability.

Last month, Carter officials reluctantly faced up to the Soviets' unwillingness to allow U-2 flights along the Russian-Turkish border to pick up the telemetry from Soviet missile tests. Ground sites in Turkey are no substitute for the bases in Iran because the intervening terrain prevents line-of-sight coverage of the launch phase of missile testing. Without access to this data, it will be impossible to determine reliably whether the Soviets are cheating on the SALT limits on the size and payload of new missiles.

After the Turks made Soviet acquiescence to such

U-2 flights a condition of their cooperation, Carter tried and failed to get Leonid Brezhnev's agreement at the Vienna summit. To

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drive home Brezhnev's objection, Soviet ambassadors around the world have been telling Turkish diplomats that Moscow is adamantly opposed to U-2 spy planes on the border.

Lacking a substitute for U-2 coverage, the administration was obliged to admit to senatorial critics that crucial data on Soviet missile testing could not be collected until a new surveillance satellite had been specially designed and built to pick up the missing telemetry. As CIA Director Stansfield Turner testified to the Senate, a suitable satellite could not be orbited until 1984.

To meet the dilemma, the Carter administration came up with a quick-fix solution that at first blush seemed to promise access to the essential data and an escape for the Turks from Soviet pres-

sure. As a substitute for the U-2, Carter officials proposed the deployment in Turkey of a different type of plane, the EB-57. This aircraft is a two-seater with an altitude of 45,000 feet, originally designed to carry electronic equipment to jam hostile defensive radars.

Fitted with new antennae to pick up the missile telemetry, this plane was to fly from Turkish bases when Russian missile tests were believed to be imminent. With only half the altitude of the U-2, it would have been less effective but still capable of recovering some of the launch data.

In its favor was the fact

that this plane did not have the U-2's historical record of espionage activity, but unlike the U-2 it had to fly from Turkish airfields. The hope was that the Turks might accept its deployment on their territory and the Soviets would not be able to identify its purpose.

When U.S. ambassador in Ankara, Ronald Spiers, was first instructed to request Turkish approval, he balked on grounds that the Turks would have to refuse because of the high risk of exposure. When his objections were overruled, Spiers, in mid-August, put the proposal to Prime Minister Ecevit, who predictably declined to go along.

The administration now finds itself back at square one on a crucial aspect of the verification issue with no solution in sight until 1984. Carter officials are particularly concerned that outgoing U.S. ambassador to Russia, Malcolm Toon, may now reverse his grudging approval of the SALT treaty.

Toon's support was only won by assurances that the U.S. would be able to work out cooperative arrangements with the Turks to replace the Iranian sites. Now both Toon and Sen. John Glenn will be hard to persuade that the higher risk of Soviet evasion is worth taking.

Moreover, Soviet behavior seems almost deliberately designed to make SALT ratification more difficult. The Soviets are obviously more interested in building a *cordon sanitaire* around their territory to prevent American surveillance than they are in establishing cooperative verification procedures.

The irony is that the Soviets, by openly conducting field maneuvers of their brigade in Cuba, invited a discovery which has given weight to arguments that they cannot be trusted in a SALT agreement that is less than 100 per cent verifiable.